

Intriguing entrée

The 2021 edition of **ABU DHABI'S ANNUAL EUROPEAN TOUR** stop has suddenly been transformed into **A WINDOW TO A BRIGHT NEW FUTURE FOR THE GLOBAL GAME**

BY KENT GRAY

IN ANY NORMAL YEAR, the unexpected return of Rory McIlroy following a discouraging two edition absence would be *the* storyline of the 16th Abu Dhabi HSBC Championship. ▶ As the European Tour's pre-eminent showman, a drawcard globally perhaps still second only to Tiger Woods, the 31-year-old Northern Irishman's decision to make his first regular-season start on the Old World circuit in 16 months is indeed noteworthy.

That the former world No.1 has found snaring the Falcon trophy just as elusive as his attempts to be fitted for a green jacket – he's a four-time runner-up in the UAE capital – only adds spice to the plot.

The thing is, this is no ordinary year. It could never be, not after the crazy and transformative year the world has just endured, much

less the European Tour and the game globally.

Sure, the return of the Hollywood

hero to Abu Dhabi Golf Club is much welcomed and a Middle East debut for world No.3 Justin Thomas equally significant. But the marquee signings are only part of story rich narrative.

The shift in management of the Abu Dhabi HSBC Championship from IMG to the European Tour in 2021 was always going to be intriguing but the plot truly thickened when the European Tour and PGA Tour announced their "strategic alliance" in November.

Suddenly Abu Dhabi was transformed from the start of the calendar year to the start of the European Tour season full stop with a \$1 million prize purse injection. Even more significantly, it became a window to the future of a game that finally seems to be getting the ducks of a global circuit in a row. It's a move not before time, hastened by the threat of a pandemic and a mooted breakaway tour, the Saudi-backed Premier Golf League.



► **RETURN OF RORS** Rory McIlroy finished T-3 in 2018, four strokes adrift of champion Tommy Fleetwood, in his most recent appearance in Abu Dhabi

“THE SPOTLIGHT WILL INEVITABLY FALL ON MCLROY AND THOMAS BUT THE MARQUEE SIGNINGS ARE ONLY PART OF STORY RICH NARRATIVE.”

Though nothing is yet official, that Abu Dhabi remains part of the “refined” Rolex Series along with the season-ending DP World Tour Championship is a coup for our tiny corner of the world. With July’s Scottish Open and the flagship BMW PGA Championship at Wentworth in September, the new quartet of Rolex Series events have all received a \$1 million and Race to Dubai points upgrade to bring them in line with PGA Tour purses and are positioned in the global calendar seemingly ready for co-sanctioned status from 2022 and beyond.

European Tour CEO Keith Pelley has already promised “enriched media, content and broadcast coverage” to maximise the exposure of each stop. We’ll be able to judge the TV coverage for ourselves from the UAE capital because one thing hasn’t changed; only special guests will be allowed at Abu Dhabi G.C., indeed all the early season Middle East

stops as the European Tour continues to operate in a bio-secure bubble.

A sidenote to January’s edition is the final year of HSBC’s naming rights sponsorship as the bank realigns its golf sponsorship portfolio with a South East Asian focus. Which multi-national takes up the opportunity, especially now given the imminent PGA Tour link, will be intriguing.

What is certain is quality golf. The Abu Dhabi HSBC Championship rarely fails to deliver drama given the quality of the field and the birdie rich closing stretch of holes, enhanced by world class agronomy (read pure greens), on the **Peter Harradine**-designed course.

The spotlight will inevitably fall on McIlroy, second to Gary Stal in 2018, Pablo Larrazábal in 2017, Robert Rock in 2012 (all by a stroke) and by a distant eight shots to Martin Kaymer in 2011. The world No.4’s duel with



► **DESERT DEBUT** "I've heard really great things about the course and with it being the first Rolex Series tournament of the year, I'm sure it is going to deliver a strong field."

—JUSTIN THOMAS ON HIS ABU DHABI BOW

27-year-old Thomas, who won the Sentry Tournament of Champions, WGC-FedEx St. Jude Invitational and PNC Championship with his father Mike in 2020, will also be worth the price of a cable/online streaming subscription alone. There are plenty of other names besides to keep an eye on, notably defending champion and reigning European No.1 Lee Westwood and the uber-consistent Tommy Fleetwood, a two-time champion in Abu Dhabi and rival to McIlroy in the popularity stakes.

Can Matt Fitzpatrick back-up his DPWTC victory last month? Likewise, will Laurie Canter and Rookie-of-the-Year Sami Välimäk, such a big part of the end of last season at Jumeirah Golf Estates, be able to kick on? There's even life left in Kaymer it seems. As a three-time winner, the German has pedigree in Abu Dhabi and his tie for 14 at Jumeirah Golf Estates, amid an improving list of 2020 results, shows a first win since the 2014 U.S. Open is surely only a matter of time.

Add the resumption of the European Tour qualifying process for the rescheduled Ryder Cup at Whistling Straits in September, and the stage is set for a memorable start to 2021 in the UAE capital. The coronavirus continues to cause heartache around the globe but the worse year in memory for many has been a boon for golf at both the amateur and professional level. Times are changing and irrefutable proof of the latter will play out at Abu Dhabi. It won't surprise if McIlroy writes the new chapter, changing his own Abu Dhabi nearly-man narrative in the process. 📍